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### Just a Pie in the Sky: 'Life of Pi' as a Trauma Narrative

Abstract: 'Life of Pi' is a Canadian novel by Yann Martel. It is a story of hope, faith and struggle to survive. The novel is talking about the fantastical story of Pi Patel, a sixteen year old Indian boy who survives at the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a male Bengal tiger for 227 days in a life boat after a horrible shipwreck. While Pi's story unfolds in a magical way, by the end of the novel two officials come to interview Pi Patel. They question the truthfulness of Pi story with animals. So Pi tells another version of the story, in which animals were replaced by human beings including Pi's mother. In this study, I focus on the impact of psychological stress and the onset of post traumatic stress disorder. Pi is experiencing dissociation in order to survive his reality. So according to my reading and understanding of the novel, I believe that story with the animals is constructive imagination of Pi's mind, because the real version with all its darkness and death is too difficult for him to cope with.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Imagination, Reality, Pain, Emplotment, Coping

### Just a Pie in the Sky: 'Life of Pi' as a Trauma Narrative

The topic of trauma has awoken a great deal of curiosity in social and academic circles in the last few decades, this popularity has helped to develop a whole new discipline

called Trauma Studies ,which explores the lasting influence of traumatic events in various ways. The discipline of trauma studies initially situated in the field of Medicine and then Psychology, the study of trauma has, over the last few years become important in Cultural and Literary studies. Psychological trauma is a type of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of severely painful events. As trauma has become a relevant topos in fiction and biography writing, trauma studies has developed as anew area with in the humanities. The Milestone publications in this field in the 1990's , such as Cathy Caruth's essay collection 'Trauma: Exploration in Memory' (1995) and 'Unclaimed Experience' (1996) , were soon followed by lot of studies on trauma in culture , fiction , and film. Soshana Felman, Joufrey Hartman, Dori Laub, Laurie Vikroi and Judit Herman are the other major figures contributed to this field of studies. Then the idea of trauma has departed from its archetypal disciplinary basis and crossed limits and emerged to various fields such as Literature and Literary Criticism.

'Life of Pi' is a brilliant Canadian fantasy novel by Yann Martel, published in 2001. It is a story of hope, faith and struggle to survive. The novel is talking about the fantastical story of Pi Patel, a sixteen year old Indian boy from Pondichery who survives at the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a male fully grown Bengal tiger for 227 days in a life boat after a horrible shipwreck. The beginning of the novel covers Pi Patel's childhood and young age. His family runs a zoo in their hometown in Pondichery. Pi's father taught his children about the animal nature and he also forced the children to watch the tiger kill and eat a goat. Pi moves through a significant religious awakening and embrace many religions, from Hinduism to Christianity and finally Islam. Although the religious heads did not accepted Pi's plural religious practice, but Pi becomes a devout follower of all three religious ways for his entire life. When Pi becomes sixteen year old, because of the political strifes in India, Pi's family dicides to move to Canada with their zoo animals on a cargo ship named 'tsimtsum'.

They embark on a sea voyage, but a deadly storm hits and the ship sinks. At that time Pi was on the ship's deck, he is tossed into a lifeboat by the crew. The next day morning, he finds himself in the company of some zoo animals, a severely injured zebra, a dreadful hyena, and a matronly orangutan named 'orange juice'. Hiding out of sight from, beneath the tarpaulin of the lifeboat, the tiger Richard Parker revealed himself. The vicious hyena wounds and eats the zebra, then moves after urangutan. The urangutan puts up a good fight, but the hyena finally kills her. Then the tiger Richard Parker comes to the scene and kills and eats the hyena. Then Pi and Richard Parker survive in the lifeboat.

The rest of the novel covers how Pi and Richard Parker survive in the Pacific Ocean for 227 days in the lifeboat. Pi trapped in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with the tiger. He quickly realize that thirst will kill him before hunger or the tiger , so Pi sets about finding a way to get the water . He finds provisions stored in the lifeboat, including water, water purifiers, biscuits, a whitsle and a book for surviving at the ocean. Using the tools Pi creates a second watercraft, a raft made of lifejackets and oars. Then he attaches the raft on to the lifeboat. Using the raft, Pi can remains out of the immediate attack of both tiger and sharks. Pi considers a number of survival options and concludes that he must tame the tiger. Although he is unable to tame the tiger completely, he manages to control him by blowing the whitsle and shaking the boat enough to make the tiger seasick. Then Pi subdues the tiger and obtains his own territory on the boat. Pi temporarily losses his vision and mind. He starts having a talk with Richard Parker in which they both dreams about the types of foods they would like to have. Pi focuses on vegetarian foods and Richard Parker fixates on the recipes with meat. But unlike the dream Pi realises that he must have eat the raw flesh to survive at the sea. Pi was a pure vegetarian, so he at first morally outraged on the idea of having meat. During the fantastical thoughts, another castaway in a boat comes, also blind and also very tired of hunger. Pi welcomes the French speaking man to the lifeboat believing

him to be a good friend. But the man attacks Pi saying that he intends to eat him, and then Richard Parker come to the scene and consumes the man. Pi and Richard Parker eventually reaches in an island without soil, which is created entirely of trees, roots, plants and fresh water. However, Pi makes a frightening discovery that he finds a fruit on the tree, which contains a human tooth in it. By realising that the island is a carnivorous being, Pi and Richard Parker return to the lifeboat and went to the sea again. An undetermined amount of time Pi and Richard Parker lives in the middle of the ocean using many survival methods, and finally reaches on Mexican beach. Richard Parker runs to the forest and never came back.

While Pi's story in the sea unfolds in a magical way, by the ending of the novel we are left to wonder about the overall truthfulness of Pi's story. Because at the end of the novel two officials from Japanese ministry of transport come to interview Pi Patel. They question the believability of Pi's story, at first Pi tried to stick on his story then Pi tells them another version of the story, this time with human beings instead of animals. Pi's mother in the place of orangutan, a young and beautiful sailor in the place of zebra, a cruel cook in the place of hyena and Pi himself in the place of the tiger Richard Parker. Like in the animal version of the story, the cook kills the sailor and Pi's mother and then Pi kills the cook and left alone in the sea for 227 days in the lifeboat. By these two versions of stories, we are not sure which one is the true story really happened. But like the officials, we readers also consider the story with the animals as better story. But in this study, I focus on the impact of psychological stress and the onset of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Pi is experiencing dissociation in order to survive his reality. So according to my reading and understanding of the novel, I believe that story with the animals is constructive imagination of Pi's mind, because the real version with all its darkness and death is too difficult for him to cope with. The carnivorous island made of sea weeds and the floating bananas are all parts of his imagination, and the tiger was extension of his own mind. Pi involved in a shipwreck, he

losses his entire family, he even witnessed his mother's death and he also kills the cook, and he is all alone to cope with the reality. So his mind creates an alternative reality.

Late in pi's sea adventure, after pi has become blind, pi meets another blind man on another boat in the middle of the sea. This account is one of the most absurd moments in the novel. Pi and the other blind french speaking castaway man surrealistically talk to each other, and Pi tells him this story "once upon a time there was a banana and it grew. It grew untill it was large, firm, yellow and fragrant. Then it fell to the ground and someone came upon it and ate it" (Martel, 278). We also see that Pi goes slightly chaotic in the narrating of his story. In a time, he loses the thread of what he is talking about. Pi tells us, "I remember the smell of the spent hand-flare shells. By some freak of chemistry, they smelled exactly like cumin" (Martel, 221). Then he says, "I don't remember any smells or only the smell of the spent hand-flare shells. They smelled like cumin, did I mention that?" (Martel, 265). He also tells us "You can get used to anything - haven't I already said that? Isn't that what all survivors say?" (Martel, 247). In re-telling the story, Pi felt on his journey as he starts to lose his mental facilities and concentration. According to the theory of trauma and psychoanalysis, "the patient has overemplotted the events, has charged them with a meaning so deep that, whether real or imagined, they continue to shape both his perception and response to the world long after they should have become 'past history' (white, 1389)". The patient can neither successfully deny nor accept the meaning behind the events happened. That person has imbued these experienced events with a meaning that is so intense. He is unable to process and deal with them, so his only option is to repress those events, to tell him something different happened.

In chapter 98, Mr. Okamoto says to Mr. Chiba in Japanese, "He thinks we are fools" (Martel, 324). The fantastic nature of the narrative-specifically, Pi's claim that he shared such close contact with a tiger-overwhelms them, and they are unable to even account it might be

true. Mr. Okamoto also says, "I am sorry to say so bluntly, we don't mean to hurt your feelings, but you don't really expect us to believe you, do you? Carnivorous trees? Fish-eating algae that produces fresh water? Tree dwelling aquatic rodents? These things don't exist" (Martel, 326). Pi sticks in his story, saying, "If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? Isn't love hard to believe?...Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?" (Martel 330). Although the story is possible, the flimsy nature of the story does not allow the Japanese men to accept it. It is too impossible. Pi then ascertains, "I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless, factuality" (Martel, 336). He then tells another story, one that takes up about nine pages. A short summary of this narrative is required so that we can compare it to the story with animals. In this narrative all the animal characters were replaced by human characters including Pi's mother. This narrative projects a view of life that highlights cruelty, corruption, greed and futility. Pi recalls one of the most painful scenes in the story that cook kills Pi's mother and beheads her, "He hurled something my way. No whip could have inflicted a more painful lash. I held my mother's head in my hands. I let it go. It sank in a cloud of blood, her dress trailing like a tail" (Martel, 344).

Imagine that you were in a shipwreck, and you were trapped in the middle of the sea on a lifeboat. In addition to that you have lost your family and even witness your mother's death. Now imagine all of these happened to you as a child, how would you cope? It is very likely that your brain would not be able to process all of these and continue to work as it normally does. In times of extreme trauma, the mind has a coping mechanism to allow survival. Pi's mind creates an alternative narrative to the terrifying events he has witnessed



and participated. This narrative is what we read as Pi's primary story of what happened at the sea. So I conclude that Pi's fantastic version of the story is not real, this story came out from his extreme trauma. Pi is not necessarily lying about his sea adventure with Richard Parker, but his memory may have been severely damaged by the trauma due to murder, death, cannibalism, 227 days alone in the sea, shipwreck and the overwhelming despair of loss of his family. Like many trauma survivors, Pi may have blocked out the reality and re-written his story in order to survive. His religious and spiritual background is used as a coping mechanism to help give him a sense of beauty and meaning beyond the terrible events.



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